

Five Attitudes of Effective Teachers: Implications for Teacher Training

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Abstract

When preservice teachers or teacher candidates are asked, "Why do you want to be a teacher?" The response is commonly, "I want to be able to make a positive difference in the lives of my students." Many teacher candidates continue to say they also want to be an effective teacher who will be remembered fondly by their former students. Some want to have a chance to be a better teacher than the teachers they personally experienced. However, many researchers (i.e., Frank, 1990; Fulton, 1989; Goodlad, 1990; Handler, 1993) state the axiom that teachers usually teach in the way they were taught. This compelling statement highlights the importance of reviewing and analyzing students' prior educational experiences for insight into the effective and ineffective attitudes and actions of teachers.

The effective attitudes and actions employed by teachers ultimately can make a positive difference on the lives of their students, and this belief will serve as the central focus of this paper. By examining prior educational experiences, preservice teachers can discuss what they should or should not do with a class of students. The five frequently discussed attitudes and actions include: a genuine caring and kindness of the teacher, a willingness to share the responsibility involved in a classroom, a sincere sensitivity to the students' diversity, a motivation to provide meaningful learning experiences for all students, and an enthusiasm for stimulating the students' creativity.

The format of this article will address four main sections. The first section will explain the methodology used for the discovery of the five effective teacher attitudes and actions. In sections two and three, the effective and ineffective attitudes and actions will be discussed more specifically by summarizing the preservice teachers' discussions. A research based discussion of the described effective attitudes and actions will be the focus of the fourth section.

Introduction

The responsibility for preparing teachers is assumed to begin with teacher education programs at higher education institutions. However, by the time undergraduate students enroll in an Introduction to Teaching course they have already experienced and survived many teachers and at least fourteen years of schooling. Since these students have achieved this wealth of educational opportunities; they can serve as credible resources in identifying the attitudes and actions that were implemented in prior classrooms by their effective teachers.

When preservice teachers or teacher candidates are asked, "Why do you want to be a teacher?" The response is commonly, "I want to be able to make a positive difference in the lives of my students." Many teacher candidates continue to say they also want to be an effective teacher who will be remembered fondly by their former students. Some want to have a chance to be a better teacher than the teachers they personally experienced. However, many researchers

(i.e., Frank, 1990; Fulton, 1989; Goodlad, 1990; Handler, 1993) state the axiom that teachers usually teach in the way they were taught. This compelling statement highlights the importance of reviewing and analyzing students' prior educational experiences for insight into the effective and ineffective attitudes and actions of teachers.

Teachers have the opportunity to leave an indelible impression on their students' lives. School experiences mold, shape, and, can influence how children view themselves inside and outside of school. These school memories have the potential to last a lifetime in students' minds and can play a consequential role with present and future decisions. It does not take long for students to realize that teachers make the difference between a long and boring school year and an exciting and challenging year.

The effective attitudes and actions employed by teachers ultimately can make a positive difference on the lives of their students, and this belief will serve as the central focus of this paper. By examining past educational experiences, preservice teachers can discuss what they should or should not do with a class of students. The format of this article will address four main sections:

1. Section I. The methodology used in this study for the discovery of five effective teacher attitudes;
2. Section II. The teacher candidates' discussion on the five effective teacher attitudes;
3. Section III. The teacher candidates' discussion on the ineffective teacher attitudes; and
4. Section IV. Research based discussion on the five effective teacher attitudes with implications for preservice teachers.

Section I. Methodology for the Discovery of Five Effective Teacher Attitudes

As a professor, I have been able to collect valuable information that has been obtained through a three year study with students enrolled in the Introduction to Teaching and Learning course. This study initiated in August 2002, spanned eight semesters and included 210 undergraduate education students. It involved an assignment where these students wrote an essay about a teacher who made a positive or negative impression on their lives. Each student was instructed to include thoughtful examples, descriptions, and details of how they were treated by these teachers. This written assignment also required students to compare how the chosen teacher's attitudes and actions differed from those of other teachers. Following this written portion of the assignment, in groups of four, students orally shared their essays while a group member kept a written list of the described teacher attitudes and actions.

After this activity, the students in their small groups assessed the generated list and decided which five attitudes and actions are most desirable of teachers. A speaker from each group wrote their list on the chalkboard, which served as a visual, for the following whole class discussion on the similarities and differences of each group's findings. Without fail, there were consistencies in every discussion about the attitudes and actions demonstrated by effective teachers.

The five frequently discussed attitudes and actions include: a genuine caring and kindness of the teacher, a willingness to share the responsibility involved in a classroom, a sincere sensitivity to the students' diversity, a motivation to provide meaningful learning experiences for all students, and an enthusiasm for stimulating the students' creativity. Each attitude will be discussed below by summarizing a few of the comments made by the teacher candidates in the Introduction to Teaching and Learning course.

Section II. Teacher Candidates' Discussion on the Five Effective Teacher Attitudes

First Attitude: Demonstrating Caring and Kindness

This attitude pertains to the persona of the teachers. Statements were written in the essays that discussed a realness and genuineness about their teachers' attitudes toward caring and kindness. The effective teachers willingly shared emotions and feelings (i.e., enthusiasm, affection, patience, sadness, disapproval) as well as a sincere interest and care about their students. Communication was also valued in their past classrooms and feelings were openly expressed by both the children and teachers.

Second Attitude: Sharing Responsibility

This attitude focuses on the ability of the teacher to establish a shared environment. The teacher candidates emphasized that an effective teacher must not be overly possessive or need complete control of the children and environment. It is important to allow students both responsibility and freedom within the classroom community. Comments were also shared that both the teachers and students need to contribute to the learning environment for a relationship of closeness and acceptance to develop.

Third Attitude: Sensitively Accepting Diversity

This attitude deals with empathy and the importance of understanding your students. The teacher candidates identified sensitivity, acceptance, and encouragement as critical when approaching the issues associated with the diversity of the children. The candidates found effective teachers understood their students without analyzing or judging. One group shared the comment that teachers have the ability to make each child feel special by verbally sharing individual compliments in front of the class. Another group discussed a teacher who kept a written record of how many times she talked and listened to each child and how that made students feel valued and important.

Fourth Attitude: Fostering Individualized Instruction

This attitude discusses the ability to provide meaningful learning opportunities for all students. The teacher candidates appreciated teachers who helped them succeed with their learning experiences. They also stated that other teachers used intimidation in front of the class which resulted in a reluctance to volunteer. Particular groups felt strongly that effective teachers believe every child can and will learn. Their teachers did not point out weakness, but instead

stressed individual strengths and talents. The preservice teachers credited their teachers for encouraging positive self-confidence and self-esteem.

Fifth Attitude: Encouraging Creativity

This attitude stresses the importance of stimulating the students' creativity. Teacher candidates talked about teachers who listened to their ideas and suggestions for lessons and activities. The effective teachers were open to students' ways of being imaginative and also utilized many approaches to learning. The students appreciated and were personally motivated when teachers designed lessons that considered their interests, skills, and needs.

Section III. Teacher Candidates' Discussion on Ineffective Teacher Attitudes

Elements of learning destruction that were mentioned in the teacher candidates' essays included placing too much emphasis on grades or giving the one and only correct answer to questions. Consequently, the students were overly concerned about finding the correct answers or trying to read their teachers' mind to say what she wanted to hear. Students also were overwhelmed when a teacher added too many details or directions to assignments. With little opportunity for creativity, the students became disengaged from the learning process.

For the teacher candidates there was also a negative response to rewards, bribes, punishments, restriction of choices, and outward signs of competition between the students. Competition created a burden that interfered with learning since the students only worked for the grades and praise from their teachers. Some of their teachers used extrinsic motivators or token rewards and these methods reduced the students' desire to learn and even lowered their achievement levels. Many preservice teachers felt a more effective method involved building on the students' intrinsic motivation by providing a fun classroom environment.

Section IV. Research Based Discussion on the Five Effective Teacher Attitudes with Implications for Preservice Teachers

Calderhead (1996), Pianta (1999), and Watson (2003) have described teaching as an intensely psychological process and believe a teacher's ability to maintain productive classroom environments, motivate students, and make decisions depends on her personal qualities and the ability to create personal relationships with her students. These effective attitudes and actions employed by teachers ultimately can make a positive difference on the lives of their students.

It is known that attitudes have a profound impact on teacher practices and behaviors. Richardson (1996) states, "Attitudes and beliefs are a subset of a group of constructs that name, define, and describe the structure and content of mental states that are thought to drive a person's actions" (p. 102). With effective attitudes, teachers and students can develop relationships of mutual respect and trust. Studies on each of these five attitudes have been completed by researchers, and a brief summary will follow that reinforces the findings from the Introduction to Teaching and Learning course.

First Attitude: Demonstrating Caring and Kindness

Research by Larson and Silverman (2000) and Noddings (1984) has emphasized the importance of developing a caring and respectful relationship between teachers and students. They support students' needs for both communication and care in order to achieve a personal relationship with their teachers. Noddings (1984) believes the entire school curriculum should be built around the ethic of care. She contends that with this construction, caring will become an integral part of a committed, reciprocal relationship between the teacher and student.

Second Attitude: Sharing Responsibility

Carlson and Hastie (1997) believe teachers' and students' agendas need to overlap and be in support of each other, and the end result would be a positive learning environment. This way of learning is a challenging way of constructing freedom in the classroom. The strength in a constructivist based classroom is in the lessons and activities of the students. Zimmerman (1990) and Claxton (1996) believe that the learning process should be organized in such a way that students take responsibility for their own learning. Students should be independent and able to make decisions about their learning ability and then plan accordingly. Richardson (1999) states student-directed learning and curricula have become focal points for all constructivist-based teaching and learning practices.

Third Attitude: Sensitively Accepting Diversity

It is critical for students to feel positive about themselves as individuals in order to gain the self-confidence to try new things. Verbally praising a shy or friendless child can be a turning point for their self-esteem and confidence level. A child may be born with a talent but someone, such as a teacher, needs to realize and believe in it or it may not ever be nurtured. A teacher has the ability to reinforce, support, and appreciate the work and play of her students.

Teacher training programs need to provide teacher candidates with knowledge and experiences with diversity, including cultural diversity. Nel (1992) stated that it would seem the trend toward more pluralistic attitudes in teachers needs to be translated into a strong and clear commitment to multicultural education, which ultimately could result in positive effects on specific classroom behaviors and attitudes. Teachers need to take the initiative to fully understand the meaning and future implications of effectively working in culturally heterogeneous classrooms. An appropriate start in teacher training programs would be to have teacher candidates research their own ethnic and racial identity. Helms (1994) expressed that personal experiences may facilitate the development and adoption of a tolerant and pluralistic orientation.

Fourth Attitude: Fostering Individualized Instruction

When designing lesson plans, it is not easy to compete with video games, computers, television, sports, and music. When provided with motivating activities and lessons, students become active and independent agents of their own learning. Learning should become an open adventure that does not lead down one straight and narrow path, but instead many roads should

be provided that lead to a variety of destinations. Students have the right to travel with an encouraging facilitator or teacher waiting at each road block or challenge with a smile and an optimistic attitude that encourages them to continue their learning adventures. All children need a form of individualized instruction and to be actively involved in their learning. Teachers may resist the extra work required with individualizing, but research supports its importance. This is especially an issue for students with special needs.

When providing daily instruction for students with special needs, the curriculum content, materials, abilities, and teaching methods require thoughtful consideration. Research suggests effective teachers think and behave in certain ways with children who have disabilities. McNergney and Keller (1999) observed a large number of teachers and conducted interviews. Overall, their results revealed effective teachers, and especially those who teach children with special needs, should pay attention to students' progress and actively involve them in learning activities, while offering guidance and praise for effort and accomplishments.

Fifth Attitude: Encouraging Creativity

When given the opportunity to be creative, students will take their learning to higher levels and become actively engaged in lessons by contributing ideas and insights. Teachers should capitalize on students' intrinsic motivation, cognitive learning styles, and skill levels. This type of environment will be most conducive to fostering learning.

Also, incorporating Howard Gardner's intellectual strengths, or multiple intelligences, into daily lesson planning can provide direction for teachers to offer students diverse opportunities for creative ways of learning or knowing in the classroom. The eight intelligences identified by Gardner (1997) are verbal-linguistic, logical-mathematical, visual-spatial, bodily-kinesthetic, musical, interpersonal, intrapersonal, and naturalistic. Gardner's notion supports the continued argument that education needs to accommodate students' unique ways of learning and creativity needs to be a partner in the learning process.

Summary

In conclusion, there is potential in every student, and a teacher's attitude and actions can leave lasting impressions. Teachers need to be risk takers by being themselves and by trusting their students. They also need to create independent individuals so learning is more likely to take place. Effective teachers genuinely care, like, accept, and value their students. These teachers will demonstrate kindness, share responsibility, accept diversity, foster individual instruction, and encourage creativity. With the knowledge of these five attitudes and actions, they will have the potential to be an effective teacher who will be remembered fondly by former students.

Preservice teachers just entering a teacher training program can offer valuable insight and knowledge about their prior teachers. These educational experiences have made a difference in their lives, and for whatever the reasons, they are now considering a career in teaching. For the undergraduate students who continue and receive a degree in teaching, it will be important for them to always remember how it felt to be the student and to share with their students that there is no greater wisdom than kindness.

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